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Severance Pay

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Kim van Alkemade

Severance Pay

Winner, 2008 Montana Prize in Creative Nonfiction

My brother's been up all night, waiting for sunrise to dial the phone. The metallic ring yanks me from sleep. I pick up the handset, pulling impatiently at the tangled spiral cord.

"Dad didn't come home last night," Rob says. That's all he has to say for the connection between us to tremble like a string pulled taught between two tin cans.

"Did he say where he was going?" I ask.

"He said he had a date, told me not to wait up," he tells me, but we both know right off this is a lie. In the seven years since our parents' divorce, our dad's only had two girlfriends, both disasters. The chances he's struck up something new with a woman we've never heard of are nil.

"I'll catch the next bus to Racine and be down in a couple of hours. Are you going to school?"

"No, I'll wait for you here," he says.

"Okay, see you soon."

I put down the phone carefully. I get myself together without apparent haste, ignoring the flutter in my gut. I shove a change of clothes and the book I'm reading for my literature class into a backpack, spill a pile of food into the cat's bowl, pull a red beret over my head, and shrug on my second-hand wool coat. I close the door on my studio apartment, leaving a mug of herbal tea cooling on the table, the futon bed unmade, and dirty pajamas strewn over the round rattan chair that balances on its base like a satellite dish. Outside, I wait in the plastic bus shelter, looking for the Number 30 to come down Prospect Avenue. It's January in Milwaukee so of course it's freezing, but it's the chill wind off Lake Michigan that makes me shiver.

When I was a little girl, after my mother had gotten us ready for bed and the fish in the tank on my dresser had been fed their pinch of foul-smelling flakes, my dad would come to tuck me in. Holding his burning Chesterfield out of the way, he'd stoop down to give me a kiss. The contents of his shirt pocket

would spill across the bed when he leaned over; we made a game of pawing around for his lighter and his pens.

"Goodnight, lief meisje," he'd say, using the Dutch for dear little girl. Then he'd turn out the light, becoming a red dot glowing in the darkness

"Goodnight, Dad," I'd say, turning my face into the pillow. The smell of smoke lingered on my cheek where he'd kissed me.

On the Badger Bus from Milwaukee to Racine, I rest my forehead against the cold window. The glass feels good, but then the bus hits some rough road and I smack my skull, so I sit back in the upholstered seat. I've got The Golden Bowl open on my lap, but I can't force my eyes to follow Henry James's convoluted sentences. Instead, I watch farm fields sliding by, wide and flat and white under a heavy gray sky. Ochre stalks of last summer's corn poke through an icy blanket of snow.

Maybe he'll have called, I tell myself. Maybe by the time I get to Racine, my father will have come home.

I think of my fifteen-year-old brother, up all night and waiting alone. Besides our dad, I'm the only relative Rob has in the state. Our mother and stepfather have moved down to Sarasota; our brother Glen, the engineer, is in Chicago; our grandparents are wintering in Miami; Dad left his family behind in the Netherlands when he came to America. That leaves the job of first responder to me, and I'm nothing if not qualified for the position. Ever since my mom left him, I've been my dad's go-to person, accompanying him to office parties, picking out his furniture, dispensing advice, and fielding his emergency phone calls. The job wasn't steady, but it had become something of a career.

One night, after my mother got us into bed and my dad tucked us in and the lights were switched off, I heard a kind of frantic, splashing sound. I called out, and my dad came back in and turned on the light.

"The fish are jumping," I said. He frowned and turned to the ten-gallon tank. A handful of Neon tetras swirled through the water, disappearing behind the plastic castle, emerging through the bubbles from the aerator. The red Swordtails glided along placidly: the female with her round belly and blunt tail, and the male, sleek and lean, his black-tipped tail trailing behind him. In the corner of the tank there was a net suspended under water full of tiny baby fish. We'd been excited to watch the female Swordtail give birth until we noticed the male was picking off his own babies the same way he gobbled up the stinky brine shrimp we occasionally dropped into the tank for a treat. The

pet store recommended the net, where the baby fish could swim safely until they grew big enough to join their father without danger.

"The fish are fine," my dad said, turning out the light. "Now stop your nonsense and go to sleep."

But the noises started up again, wet and urgent, and again I called out. This time my mother came in, turned on the light, and observed the calmly swimming fish.

"But they're splashing, they're trying to jump out!" I insisted.

I could tell she didn't believe me, and my faith in her was so strong I began to doubt it myself. My mom came over to the bed and pulled the blanket up over my ears, tucking it tight around my chin.

"There," she said. "Now you won't hear anything."

She was right. In the dark room, with the blanket over my ears, I had no trouble falling asleep.

The farm fields are giving way now to the outskirts of Racine. We follow Highway 32 past roads that tick off distances: Six Mile, Four Mile, Three Mile. Angling into the city, we pass run-down bars and muffler repair shops, Swedish bakeries and take-out taco restaurants. An hour south of Milwaukee, the bus hisses to a stop on Wisconsin Avenue. Stepping down from the bus, I wrap a scarf around my face against the cold and start walking the three blocks up Main Street to the apartment my father and brother share.

I thought I'd left Racine behind when I moved to Milwaukee for grad school, but I keep being pulled back here. There's the post office, square and gray, where I used to protest Reagan's policies in Central America. At Monument Square, I pass the old Zahn's department store, where I got caught shoplifting when I was in high school. I cross Second Street and Lake Michigan comes into view. Cold waves shoulder up against ice-covered breakers, the rhythmic sound of splashing water blending with the low drone of the Coast Guard foghorn. Further out, the lake's restless waters look like an unrolled bolt of gray silk snagged by an angry cat.

It's 1987, and Racine is in the process of reinventing its run-down commercial harbor into a recreational marina. So far, the project consists of little more than a large sign depicting gleaming condos and bobbing sailboats under a painted summer sun. Past the sign, an abandoned crane stands stiff with rust. Across the draw bridge that spans the Root River, I see the public dock from which, every July, sport fishermen launch into the twenty-two thousand square miles of fresh water, hoping beyond reason to snag one of

the fish tagged and released for the annual Salmon-O-Rama competition. The fish are filleted and wrapped and packed into freezers all over the city, but the local news warns us not to eat too many, lest the PCBs hoarded in their flesh begin to build up inside our bodies, too.

I cross the street to my father's apartment, a renovated loft above an art gallery on the corner of Third and Main. Rob buzzes me in and waits on the landing as I climb the stairs. At fifteen, he has the same gaunt look our father wears in photographs taken in 1957 after he arrived in New York from Rotterdam.

"Hey," I say, walking in. I drop my backpack and start to pull off my beret.

"Let's go out and look around," Rob says, reaching for his parka, the kind with a hood that zips into a periscope around his face. It seems he's been stuck inside, alone, for way too long. I turn and follow him into the cold.

Outside, Rob and I set off down the narrow strip of salted sidewalk that's been shoveled between the brick storefronts and the parking meters piled in snow. We turn into the alley behind the building, kicking at snow banks, looking for clues. On television, detectives like Columbo and Rockford always seem to find a receipt or a ticket stub that solves the mystery of the missing person. If they can do it, why can't we? But only empty plastic bags emerge from the dirty snow crusted with gravel. There's a green dumpster in the alley with a black-and-white "Drugs Are Garbage, Just Say No" sticker on its lid, but picking through trash would be taking the act too far. We trudge on in the fading light of the overcast day, turning our faces into the wind and squinting against the freezing air.

"Maybe he just took off somewhere for a while," I say. "Maybe he needed time to think."

"Maybe we should go to the police," Rob says.

"But it hasn't even been twenty-four hours yet," I say, acting, as usual, as if I know what I'm talking about. "You can't report someone missing until they've been gone twenty-four hours."

"When he left, he sounded sad," Rob says, looking away.

After the divorce, my dad finagled a transfer from JI Case's corporate headquarters in Racine to their small foreign office in Athens, Greece. My brothers and I traveled back and forth often for visits and vacations, but my father was alone when he suffered a stroke. His office manager called me in Wisconsin to report that my dad was in the hospital, unable to speak or move. I arranged for Case to buy me a plane ticket, arguing it was a business expense. I'd imagined so often having to make this trip in response to some crisis—a car accident from

the insane way my dad drove along the narrow mountain roads to Delphi, a tipsy fall down the marble stairs leading up to his apartment in Kiffisa—that the drive down to O'Hare, the flight to Athens, and the taxi to the hospital all seemed strangely familiar, as if I were reliving a dream.

My dad had a private room, stark and white, no beeping monitors or IVs, just a chart clipped to the foot of the bed, a pitcher of water on the bedside table. He was stretched out under a thin blanket, his hair more gray than I remembered, his right side stiff, one corner of his mouth turned down slightly. But he'd made some progress in the time it took me to get to Greece. When the nurse asked him to, he could lift his right arm and uncross his ankles, but his limbs soon dropped, exhausted. His speech was coming back, too. At first he could only speak Dutch, his co-workers told me, but now he was saying some words in English.

"It's me, Dad, I'm here now," I said, taking a seat beside his bed.

His eyes teared at the sight of me. We managed to talk for a while. It wasn't nearly as bad as I'd feared, but he was frustrated by his weakness and confused at the way words were eluding him, languages slipping into each other in his mouth, questions dying on his lips. As I got up to leave, he began pawing at my purse.

"Drop," he said, using the Dutch word for a kind of candy.

"Drop? I don't have any drop." The salty black licorice had always been a rare treat in our house, packaged with the Christmas presents that arrived every December from my Oma and Opa in Holland. But he pulled harder at my purse, tugging it open.

"Drop!" he insisted, until he got his hand inside and grabbed my crumpled pack of Marlboros. Relief swept his features as he pulled out a cigarette and placed it between his slack lips.

"Drop," he sighed, falling back against the pillow.

What else could I do? I leaned over to give him a light.

"Let's go look at his parking space," I suggest to Rob. "He could've dropped something getting into the car, a note or something. Let's go see."

My dad rents a parking spot in the Shoop Ramp, around the corner from their apartment. We walk up to the second level, following the curve of the ramp until his space comes into view. Our father's car, a gold 1985 Chrysler LeBaron, is parked in its spot, cold and mute in the gathering shadows. We stop, baffled. Wherever he's gone, we were sure he'd driven there.

I can't imagine a destination that wouldn't involve driving. The furthest

the city bus could take him is Sturtevant, a smattering of small houses and seedy bars out by the Johnson Wax factory. Other than the bus depot, I don't know of any other way out of Racine—there's no train station, no airport, in the winter not even a ferry to Michigan. Somehow, I just can't see my dad taking off on a Greyhound. He likes driving fast on the Autobahn, upgrading his international flights, and booking first-class sleeping compartments on European trains.

I spent a week in Athens. My father recuperated in the hospital while I made arrangements to bring him back to Racine for further treatment. He was getting stronger every day, soon able to get out of bed and shuffle down the hall in his underwear to a small room set aside for smoking. He'd fall into a plastic chair, his strong leg draped casually over the weaker one. His right arm hanging at his side, he'd pull deeply on one of the cigarettes he'd cadged from me. When he ran out my cigarettes, he'd bum one from another patient, a Greek woman in a loose hospital gown who spoke no English. I found them there one day, sitting in companionable silence, barely clothed, smoke seeping from their mouths and noses.

I talked Case into buying us first-class tickets back to Chicago so my dad could stretch out, and I booked a flight through Amsterdam, so his family could meet us during our layover. At Schiphol Airport, I pushed my dad in a wheel chair to the waiting area where his brothers and sisters were gathered. For an hour they sat awkwardly in fixed seats, these middle-aged siblings who together had survived the blitzkrieg on Rotterdam and endured Nazi occupation. When the boarding call for our flight was announced, they said their goodbyes as if they would be their last. If we weren't flying first class, I doubt KLM would have waited for us to come barreling up the jet way, me running behind the wheel chair, my dad clutching a carton of duty-free Winston 100s.

He was dismayed to find we were in the no smoking section of the big Boeing 747. After sipping aged Dutch gin from a frosted glass and smacking his lips, he shuffled up the narrow aisle to lean against the bulkhead in smoking, chaining one Winston to the next.

"If he's ill, he shouldn't be drinking and smoking so much," the stewardess said to me.

"Try telling that to him," I said.

I woke up in the morning and pulled the blankets down from around my ears. Then I spotted something on the floor, a red comma on the blue carpet. It was the male Swordtail, dead and shriveled.

"I told you it was jumping!" I said to my parents, showing them the dead fish. My dad pried it up and carried it away in a tissue. I was sad about the fish, but also glad to be proven right. I knew I hadn't imagined those sounds, knew the splashes were real, and there was the proof of it, swirling away down the toilet. Now that the threat was gone, we were able to release the baby fish from their protective net, and they joined the female Swordtail and the Neon tetras in the larger tank, little red apostrophes drifting through the water.

Still, when I went to sleep that night, I pulled the blanket up over my ears.

For a few years, my dad had been saying he was glad to be at the Athens branch, out of sight of Case's corporate headquarters. With the economic downturn of the 1980s, there'd been fewer sales for him to finance as the developing nations he worked with invested less in the tractors and earth-moving equipment his company manufactured. He'd actually considered quitting Case and taking a job in Saudi Arabia, working under contract. But I'd talked him out of it.

"There's no retirement plan, no health insurance," I pointed out during a summer visit to Greece while I was in college. "You've got ten years to go until you can retire with benefits, why give that all up for a contract job?"

So he stayed with Case, and now he was back in Racine. On his first day out of the hospital, I went with my dad to company headquarters for a meeting with the human resources manager.

"What we have to decide is whether you'll be returning to the Athens branch or working from an office here," the manager said from behind his desk.

"Returning to Athens would be preferable," my dad said, the words slurring in his mouth. I was sitting just behind him, out of his field of vision. The manager looked over my dad's shoulder at me. I met his eyes, and shook my head no. I was afraid he wouldn't be able to manage in Greece on his own, afraid I'd have to go back again if his health failed, or worse. I wanted him close, where I could keep an eye on him, help him out if he needed me.

"Well, we'll have a meeting and make a decision, Mr. van Alkemade."

They decided to keep him in Racine. An international moving company packed up everything in my dad's apartment in Kiffisia and shipped it all back to Wisconsin. My dad found the apartment downtown, and Rob came

to live with him and go to high school in Racine. Before he could go back to work, though, my dad needed a car, the blue Renault wagon we'd driven across Europe having been left behind. I pushed for an import, telling him Consumer Reports was raving about the Toyota Camry. But he'd been inspired by the charismatic Lee Iacocca and had his heart set on a Chrysler. At the dealership, he'd been drawn to the LeBaron right away. My dad didn't care about the performance statistics the eager salesman was spouting; his mechanical knowledge of cars was limited to the location of the gas cap. No, it was the name that appealed to him, so masculine, so continental.

"Let's take it for a test drive, shall we?" he suggested gallantly.

It was the first time my father had been behind the wheel of a car since recovering from his stroke, and that right leg was heavier than he'd bargained for. We careened out of the lot, swiveled around the corner, then jerked to a stop at a red light. In the back seat, I checked my seatbelt and gripped the door handle. Up front, the salesman paled. The light changed and off we went, surging ahead a few blocks before my dad turned the nose of the car sharply back in the direction of the lot.

At the dealership, seated safely behind his desk again, the salesman wiped his brow and proffered my father a bill of sale. I think the sticker price was around fifteen thousand dollars, but they were having an end-of-model-year clearance sale, so there was room to maneuver. My dad settled in for negotiations.

"Here's what I'll pay," he stated, laboring to form a commanding figure eight on the page with his stiff right hand.

"Eight thousand?" the salesman asked. "Are you serious?"

"Just take that to your manager," he insisted. He leaned back in his chair, lit a cigarette, and blew a cloud of smoke in the salesman's face. When the salesman left, my dad turned to me and said, with relish, "This is my language we're talking now." I knew my dad was in finance, but I'd never seen him negotiate a deal before. I just thought he was crazy.

The bill of sale was shuttled back and forth a few times, numbers scribbled and crossed out until a deal was struck. It turned out my father knew what he was doing after all. We reeled away in the LeBaron for around eleven thousand dollars.

My dad made the short drive to work in the LeBaron for about a year before the executives at Case realized that there wasn't enough business to justify having an international finance officer dedicated to Africa and the Middle East. He called me one morning to give me the news.

"They let me go," he said, mournfully.

"Just like that? No notice or anything?"

"No, no notice. They told me this morning."

"What happens now?" I asked.

"I guess I'll collect unemployment while I look for another job," he said, sounding weary at the thought of it. "And I've got my severance pay, sixty-thousand dollars." I was getting by on a six-hundred dollar monthly stipend from my teaching assistantship, which covered everything from rent to books; sixty-thousand dollars sounded like a shit load of money to me.

For the next month or so, my dad tried looking for comparable work, sending out resumes and waiting for interviews. But in the Midwest in the mid-eighties, downsized middle-aged executives were a surplus commodity. Out of work at fifty-four, divorced, and with health problems to boot. I feared he might fall into the deep statistical trough of male mid-life suicides. Instead, he announced his decision to use his severance pay to open an Indonesian restaurant.

Cooking had always been his hobby, and for the colonizing Dutch, Indonesia provided the ethnic cuisine of choice. For years, I'd assisted my dad at extravagant dinners for which he began preparing months in advance, serving the dozens of dishes that make up an Indonesian Rijs Tafel. At one dinner, some guests who didn't know us well asked my father how we'd met. "We met at the hospital," he answered, enjoying the little misunderstanding, "on the day she was born."

"You've got to talk him out of it," my mother called to say when she heard about the restaurant. "He'll waste all that money, then how will Rob ever go to college?" But for once I was determined to back my dad up all the way. When he showed me the menu he was working on—dishes like Nasi Gorang and Saté Babi and Gado Gado listed in his nearly illegible hand—I offered to write out his menu with my calligraphy pen. When he told me he'd found a restaurant for sale in Milwaukee, not far from my place, I was excited to meet him there.

Just last night, I waited for him at a restaurant that didn't seem to be going out of business, sitting alone at a table, checking my watch and ordering nothing. Finally, assuming I'd mistaken the date, I bundled up and walked home. At the same time, my father was getting ready to go out, tucking in his scarf and pulling on his gloves. "I have a date," he was saying to my brother. "Don't wait up for me."

Not long after my fish died, I woke up to find my dad sound asleep on the blue couch, his face hidden in the cushions, feet tucked up, back curved out like a comma. My mom and brother were shaking him, but he wouldn't budge. I thought he was being silly, so I went to get a glass of water to splash in his face. But my mom's hand closed on my wrist, and something in her touch told me this wasn't a game. My brother and I were hustled off to a neighbor's while an ambulance took my dad away.

He spent a few days in the hospital. I think I remember visiting him there, but I'm not really sure. I do remember my mother's explanation—that my dad had taken too many aspirins for a very bad headache and had to have his stomach pumped at the hospital. I had no reason not to believe her, but something about her words didn't seem right. He came home a few days later, tired and thin. If I'd been looking for it, I suppose I would have noticed my mother's tense vigilance, my father's deep sadness. But as far as I could tell, everything was fine. By day, I ignored the weird feeling in the pit of my stomach. At night, I covered my ears.

In the parking ramp, Rob and I peer through the windows of the locked LeBaron, but we don't see any maps or brochures on the seats, and there aren't any matchbook covers or ticket stubs on the ground. As the sun deserts the winter sky, we trudge back to the apartment.

We peel off our coats in the welcome warmth. Little puddles of snowmelt form around our abandoned boots and our socks slide on the wood floor. I look around at all the things my father had shipped back to the States from Greece. The modern Scandinavian furniture imported from Denmark is arranged at right angles around a wool rug. Dark carvings collected in Tanzania and patterned tapestries woven in Turkey hang on the walls. An inlaid backgammon board that was given to my father by the chief of a Bedouin tribe sits next to the Bang & Olufsen stereo system. On the glass-topped coffee table, there's an overflowing onyx ashtray from Tunisia, a polished brass coffee service acquired in Damascus, and a ceramic Greek vase decorated with a pornographic scene featuring well-endowed satyrs and a willing nymph.

"Maybe we should look around in Dad's room," Rob suggests.

Our father's bedroom is a mess, the sleek lines of the bed frame muddled by piled blankets and crumpled sheets that smell like they've gone too long since being laundered. We begin to sift through the stuff on his dresser: pens, folded papers, utility bills, handkerchiefs, socks, bank statements. I pull open a drawer and there, on top of the undershirts, I see a white letter-size envelope with my name scrawled on it.

I pick up the envelope. It's thick and heavy. As I tear open the flap, the idea that my father's arranged all this falls through me like the floors of a collapsing building.

There's a sharp report as falling metal hits the wood planks at my feet. Rob and I look down to see the silver keys to the LeBaron splayed on the brown floor.

I look inside the envelope. There's a thick sheaf of notes. I pull them out, ruffle them with my thumb. This is what my father's left me: ten thousand dollars in hundred-dollar bills. No words, only cash.

He didn't have to spell it out for me to understand the message he was sending. In the only way he knew, he was letting me go.